

Attorney General Martha Coakley  
Hearing on Sexual Exploitation and the Internet  
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My name is Nikki Valila and I am the Program Director of the ACT Group Home at Germaine Lawrence. The ACT Group Home is an 8 bed program which offers therapeutic services to girls who are at risk or have been sexually exploited. For the past 30 years Germaine Lawrence has been working with at risk adolescent girls. Through this work, we have served numerous victims of Child Sexual Exploitation.

Prior to working at Germaine Lawrence, I served as the lead advocate on Teen Prostitution cases at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office. During that time, I had the opportunity to work on a plethora of cases involving young girls who had been exploited on the streets, motels/hotels and on the internet.

As each year passes, more and more girls are identified as victims of exploitation and once silenced victims find the courage to come forward and share their stories. With less presence on street corners and city blocks, pimps have begun utilizing the internet to lure and exploit our girls. The internet can be found everywhere these days; coffee shops, hair salons, cell phones, iPods, play stations and even McDonald's. Protecting our kids has become a lot more difficult with Wi-Fi available on almost every electronic device.

Most websites allow consumers to post ads for free while requiring very little information, others require users to be 18 however do not have the ability to confirm this information. This being said, girls are being bombarded with thousands of sexual advances, friend requests and invites to chat rooms every day. Until the recent Craigslist victory, consumers could go on the website at any time of day and view newly added pictures of young girls soliciting sex. With some simple editing, these pictures could be used on numerous postings, increasing the chances of victimization.

I've had the opportunity to work with many young victims whom had their pictures posted on the internet, you tube, and various other pages without any knowledge. From my experience, just getting young girls to the point where they want to leave the life is a huge success. However, that's just the beginning. When there are pictures or videos involved, often times, girls feel like there is no escape or hope from this life. They often feel more hopeless and depressed.

Girls who have been exploited through the internet often experience a different level of shame.

“Having sex with different guys was one thing, but once I realized there were naked pictures of me all over the computer, I just wanted to die.”

“He told me the video was just for him, that he thought I was sexy... no one else would see it...I can't believe I fell for it”

“After I got picked up, I was so happy to be home. When the police told me there were pictures on the internet and that's how they found me, all I could think about is that my mom and dad probably saw them.”

“A lot of my friends like to take sexy pictures and post them; I didn't think it was a big deal. Little did I know who was going to see them and that I was getting in over my head.”

We are all left with the same question....How do we protect our young girls from the sex industry? There is no easy solution and as technology continues to expand, we will always be searching for new ways to fight this issue. Unfortunately, Craigslist is not the only website exploiting our young girls.

So what can we do, knowing removing the internet, computers, phones, etc from kids is not the solution? I truly believe that preventative education in schools can be extremely helpful. Workshops or curriculums could be implemented in schools that teach young kids/teens about the dangers of the internet and how to stay safe. We could also bring survivors of exploitation in as guest speakers to share their story and provide opportunities for kids to ask questions. We may also fund PSA's that depict some of these scenarios and show them during after school hours while hanging flyers in schools with information on how to get help.

Once we have identified that there are pictures online, we need faster ways to get them off the internet and cyberspace before they can cause more harm to these young victims.

The truth is that we can't protect our kids from all of the dangers of the internet and streets. We can however, educate, nurture and give them the tools to help keep themselves safe. Most importantly, we can give them the space to ask for help in a non judgmental environment.

Thank you